

OPINION

Rodriquez: 'I slowly began to feel human again...like I mattered,' a homeless youth story

Isabel Rodriquez, guest writer Published 1:09 p.m. ET March 4, 2020

At a glance, you may not think that I am one of the many faces of youth homelessness. I am 19 years old and about a year ago, I became homeless after problems in my home became too emotional and too dangerous for me to stay.

I had nowhere to go, no family or friends to stay with, so I went to a local domestic violence shelter that I heard about through friends at church. I was scared, alone, unsure of what my life would be like.

Have you ever had to leave the “emergency contact” blank on a form because you really did not have one? It is the loneliest feeling. I did not have any identification, no job, no plan, no hope.

A person I met at the shelter gave me the number to The Connection Youth Services, a local runaway and homeless youth program. I had never heard of this program and had no idea what to expect. I met with a case manager at The Connection who believed in me and made me feel like I could accomplish things in my life. The case manager and staff were so welcoming, and didn't judge me. I slowly began to feel human again...like I mattered.

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Lansing Police Officer Dillon Reust checks out a homeless camp near I-496 in January 2020. (Photo: Nick King/Lansing State Journal)

I moved into The Connections' transitional living apartment which put my worry about where I was going to sleep every night at ease. I had my own room, and a roommate. With this worry gone, I have been able to get the help I need to be mentally and physically healthy. I have a full-time job, as an activities assistant in a nursing home and actually have healthcare benefits! I feel like I am finally on the right path. I feel good about what I am doing.

By caring about people every day, I feel like I am giving back. Without The Connection, I have no idea where I would be today. I feel more connected to my community and I like being a part of something. It is important to know that most youth do not become homeless by choice. Most of us are forced out of our homes and into the streets doing anything we can to survive because anywhere is better than where we came from.

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One of the things I like most about being a part of The Connection is the opportunities they offer youth to be involved in their program and our community. I am the current president of The Connections' Youth Council. This is a group of youth who help to make decisions on agency programming, host youth events, and advocate for homeless and runaway youth.

One of the greatest events I have been a part of is "Dome Day" sponsored by the Michigan Network for Youth and Families. This is a day where youth and program advocates from across the state go to the State Capitol and talk to our state representatives about the impact of homelessness on youth and advocate for program support and funding.

I take my position seriously and love being a voice for youth.

Isabel Rodriguez is a high school graduate who grew up in the Pinckney area and loves her advocacy work for youth who have been homeless.

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